

THE TENNESSEAN

Health, science sectors grow in Cool Springs Despite economic decline, area adds 1,340 white-coat jobs

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Not far from a large call center, a day care and a sports training facility is a new laboratory where scientists examine cancer cells to determine what treatments would best destroy them.

The lab is owned by Nodality, which is among the newest health care companies to move into Cool Springs, a commercial center known more for its shopping options and office buildings. The biotechnology company is based in San Francisco, but opened a branch on Duke Drive in January. Financed by a group of venture capitalists, Nodality is working on a process to predict how certain cancer treatments would work on a particular patient. It's a small company with about 40 employees, 10 of whom work in Franklin, but CEO Dr. David Parkinson said he anticipates expansion.

"So why are we here?" Parkinson asked. "Because there are talented researchers and test presenters here. It's also a good, central area for shipping patient samples in and out. And it's been an absolute pleasure to deal with just about everybody we've dealt with."

Those factors — a talented and educated employee base, central location and a cordial business climate — have helped make health care the fastest-growing job sector in Williamson County. Companies that manage hospitals, patient care and create new treatments for disease have brought more than 1,340 new jobs to the county between June 2008 and July 2009, according to the Williamson County Office of Economic Development. At least 15 health care companies have either expanded in or relocated to the county since 2002.

The 27 largest health care companies in Williamson County provide 6,890 jobs here.

"In an economy like this, any job is a good job," said Matt Largen, director of the Office of Economic Development. "You start adding jobs and it creates a ripple effect. People start renting or buying, and you collect more in property taxes and sales tax. No doubt it's a multiplier effect. It also helps to encourage other companies to hire."



Research associate Danyel Specht places cancer-patient samples into a robotic machine to determine molecular patterns, which will help oncologists make treatment decisions at Nodality, a biotechnology company that opened a Cool Springs office in January. DIPTI VAIDYA / THE TENNESSEAN

Diabetes specialist is growing

Simplex Healthcare, a Williamson County-based company that provides home delivery of medical supplies to diabetic patients, was recently ranked as the fastest-growing company in the state by Inc.com. The company was founded in April 2007. Five months later, Simplex secured \$50 million in venture capital.

Simplex plans on moving into a 91,253-square-foot building in Cool Springs this fall and hiring approximately 300 people during the next two years, which would double its work force.

The largest private health care employer in the county is Community Health Systems, which has more than 1,000 employees. The company, which manages more than 125 hospitals, chose to move its corporate headquarters from Brentwood to Cool Springs in 2005, after government officials extended a 10-year, \$2 million tax abatement program. The company set up shop in a seven-story 175,000-square-foot building on Meridian Boulevard overlooking I-65. Company officials say they're in the right place.

"Cool Springs is an attractive and desirable community, with convenient access to housing, restaurants shopping and other services," said Tomi Galin, vice president of corporate communications for CHS. "All of that is beneficial when we are recruiting professional talent, and it also adds to employee satisfaction."

Industry experts say Cool Springs is quickly earning a reputation as a health-care hub. That will not only attract highly skilled job seekers but investors looking for the next big medical breakthrough.

Pioneers attract more interest

Dr. Sam Lynch, president and CEO of BioMimetic Therapeutics, said finding employees and investors was a challenge eight years ago when he brought the company here.

"The challenge was to convince venture capital investors to invest in a company in Tennessee where there were few biotech companies," Lynch said. "They would say, 'We're not sure we want to invest in what's kind of an island.' The more companies we have here, the more we're going to be known as a center for great research and product development. It will be easier for all of us to get funding."

BioMimetic is the anchor company in the Life Sciences Center on Nichol Mill Lane, which was conceived to be a campus of biotechnology companies located in three buildings. The company is developing products to improve the healing of injured bones, cartilage and ligaments, and moved into the first building in 2005.

Thanks in part to a \$5 million state grant, a second, larger building is being constructed on the campus. Lynch said BioMimetic's manufacturing facility will be moved to the new \$20 million building, bringing with it more than 50 new jobs. The Life Sciences Center is being used by state and local officials as a recruitment tool to bring in more biomedical companies. Lynch said the new building would have space for "business incubators," places where small startups can use laboratories and shared equipment to begin research.

Most biotech jobs pay well above those at call centers, Lynch said. BioMimetic officials predict that the opening of the second Life Sciences building will create 100 direct jobs and 213 indirect jobs in two years. The building could help bring in \$766 million to the county and state within 10 years, according to projections.

Worker development starts in high school

Lynch said expanding the biotech industry in Williamson County requires developing and bringing in more experienced and skilled researchers. One way this is being achieved is through a program that introduces high school students and adults to research protocols and experimentation. Last week, a group of 10 adults and 13 teens graduated from the program, earning biomedical technician diplomas. The program is a collaboration between the Tennessee Board of Regents Technology Center, the BioTen Foundation and a group of industry partners.

Classes were held at Independence High School in Thompson's Station. Students completed 900 hours of work, including 300 hours of work as interns at biomedical companies.

"What's important is that we're working very diligently at getting out ahead of the curve," said Dr. Leslie Wisner-Lynch, executive director of BioTen. "For companies to come here, grow here and stay here and flourish, we need to have that talented work force. There are specialized technicians that have to be in place for companies to be successful."

Wisner-Lynch, wife of Sam Lynch, said 39 people have applied for the next round of classes, which begin next month. About 21 will be accepted into the program.

Largen said his office is working with about 19 companies that could possibly locate or expand in Williamson County. About 30 percent of those are healthcare-related. Most want to be in Cool Springs.